

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

**Category:** Philosophy

**Sub-category:**

**Code:** Phi 01-001

**Title:** Friedrich Nietzsche: My Introduction

**Year Written:** 2020

**Summary/ Abstract:** An epoch-making philosopher, this is my very brief introduction.

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## Friedrich Nietzsche: My Introduction

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### (A) Life After Death

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) was in poor health all his life and had a short academic writing career (1873 – 1889). His works and ideas were least known during his life time. When he died in 1900 after suffering for 10 years of mental illness, the whole Europe suddenly realized his ingenuity and his impact on modern intellectual history was beginning to be felt.

Nietzsche was not just a German philosopher; he is an epoch-making intellectual critical of western culture and human history. He is a musician (composer), a philologist (scholar on ancient texts) and he prided himself a psychologist:

Nietzsche viewed himself as primarily a psychologist: “That a psychologist without equal speaks from my writing, is perhaps the first insight reached by a good reader – a reader as I deserve him” (Golomb, 1989, p.13)  
(Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 209)

### (B) The Death of God and The Nietzsche Question

Nietzsche's most famous saying, 'God is dead' originated from *The Gay Science* (1882), in which a madman proclaimed that 'God is dead' and hailed it is one of the most significant events in human history. (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 210) 'Nietzsche announced that God was dead and that we had killed him. By we, he meant the philosophers and scientists of his day' (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 210). Science and philosophy, with its rational, critical approach, had found the existence of god untestable, unverifiable, in short an untenable belief. Even a 'scientific fact' has retreated to a status of a "justifiable belief." Without God who

can we rely on for morality, purpose and meaning? That's Nietzsche's question in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe.

### **(C) Early Life and Poor Health**

Nietzsche was born to a religious family near Leipzig, Germany. His father Carl was a Lutheran / State pastor who died when Nietzsche was 5. His early life was surrounded by 5 females: grandma, 2 aunties, mother and a sister. He went to a private school and then a gymnasium in Naumburg, studying Greek, Latin, Hebrew and French. He was interested in music and poetry, and studied a mad poet Friedrich Hölderlin and got acquainted with a drunken poet Ernest Ortlepp.

In 1864, he was enrolled in the University of Bonn and studied theology and philology.

As quoted from Wiki,

Since his childhood, various disruptive illnesses had plagued him, including moments of shortsightedness that left him nearly blind, migraine headaches, and violent indigestion. The 1868 riding accident and diseases in 1870 may have aggravated these persistent conditions, which continued to affect him through his years at Basel, forcing him to take longer and longer holidays until regular work became impractical. (Wiki p.7)

### **(D) Early Christian Faith and Philosophy**

As quoted from Wiki,

As early as his 1862 essay "Fate and History", Nietzsche had argued that historical research had discredited the central teachings of

Christianity,[43] but David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* also seems to have had a profound effect on the young man.[42] In addition, Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* influenced young Nietzsche with its argument that people created God, and not the other way around.[44] In June 1865, at the age of 20, Nietzsche wrote to his sister Elisabeth, who was deeply religious, a letter regarding his loss of faith. This letter contains the following statement:

Hence the ways of men part: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe; if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire ...[45]

In 1865, Nietzsche thoroughly studied the works of Arthur Schopenhauer. He owed the awakening of his philosophical interest to reading Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and later admitted that Schopenhauer was one of the few thinkers whom he respected, dedicating the essay "Schopenhauer as Educator" in the *Untimely Meditations* to him.

In 1866, he read Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism*. Lange's descriptions of Kant's anti-materialistic philosophy, the rise of European Materialism, Europe's increased concern with science, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, and the general rebellion against tradition and authority intrigued Nietzsche greatly. Nietzsche would ultimately argue the impossibility of an evolutionary explanation of the human aesthetic sense.[46] (wiki p.4 – 5)

## **(E) Early Acquaintance and Publications**

In 1868, he met Richard Wagner.

In 1869, he was offered a professorship at the University of Basel, Switzerland to teach classical philosophy, upon the support of his teacher Wilhelm Ritschl. At age 24, he was the youngest person ever appointed to the position.

In 1870, he finished his doctorate at University of Leipzig with Ritschls.

In 1873, he wrote '*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*'

In 1873 – 76, he wrote *Untimely Meditations* on David Strauss, Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner.

In 1878, he wrote *Human, All Too Human*

a book of aphorisms ranging from metaphysics to morality to religion),  
a new style of Nietzsche's work became clear, highly influenced by  
Afrikan Spir's Thought and Reality and reacting against the pessimistic  
philosophy of Wagner and Schopenhauer. (Wiki p.7)

In 1879, he resigned from Basel because of ill-health and began his writings.

## **(F) Independent Philosopher, Love Affair and Madness**

1872	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
1882	<i>The Gay Science</i>
1882 – 3	Meets Lou Andreas – Salome, Proposes marriage but rejected.
1883	Writes <i>Also Sprach Zarathustra</i> (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 1883 – 85)
1882	Takes heavy doses of opium, insomnia.
1882	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i> (1886)
	<i>Daybreak</i>
	→ <i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i> (1887)
	<i>The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values</i> (published 1904)
	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i> (1889)
1889	<i>The Antichrist</i> (1895)
1889	3 January 1889 – Weeping at a horse, followed by his Wahnzettel (Madness letters) Signed the letters with Dionysus, the Crucified
1900	Dies of pneumonia (24 August 1900)

## **(G) The Major Themes of Nietzsche**

(1) The Apollonian and Dionysian (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 209)

- Apollo: rational, tranquil, predictable, orderly (best for life)
- Dionysus: irrational, passionate, creative, chaotic, dynamic experience  
(best for art and literature)
- Western philosophy is lifeless rationalism.
- “Do not just live, live with passion.”

## (2) Death of God

Hergenhahn and Henley told the story as follows: (210 – 211)

- 1) Philosophers / scientists kill God
- 2) Now we have to find our own meaning and purposes
- 3) But Aristotle's teleology sees universe with purpose, not humans.
- 4) Evolutionary principles have no purpose, just to survive and reproduce in environment with adaptation (Darwinian theory is 'True but deadly').
- 5) Astronomy – earth is but one of the planets revolving around billions of stars.
- 6) Biology – man is but one insignificant in animal kingdom.
- 7) Death of god → death of his shadow (metaphysics)
- 8) Cosmic tabula rasa.
- 9) Philosophy is but philosopher's individual perspective and autobiography.

## (3) Convictions (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 211)

- 1) Nietzsche is aware of the danger of human conviction (Prof. Li: religious fanatics).
- 2) 'Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.'
- 3) 'Convictions is belief in the passion of absolute truth on any matter of knowledge.'
- 4) Convictions caused human sacrifices in human history.

5) Conviction → certainty vs opinion → probable.

Prof. Li: Nietzsche foresaw the danger of religious and political ideology, elaborated later in Popper and other libertarian philosophers.

(4) Will to Power

- 1) Apparently Nietzsche developed Schopenhauer's (1788 – 1860) idea of will to survive, a blind, aimless unknown force, in the noumenal world (things-in-themselves). Man are driven by needs to survive and toward self-preservation. He saw humans (intelligent beings) suffering the most.
- 2) Human beings are irrational and his instincts should not be repressed.
- 3) The will to power is the motivating force to master, to control, to expand, to become stronger, to win, ..... defining good.

“The will to power is the primitive motive force out of which all other motives have been derived” (Sahakian, 1981, p.80). Even happiness, which the utilitarians and others claimed to be so important as a motive, is the result of the increase in one's power: “The only reality is this: The will of every centre of power to become stronger – not self-preservation, but the desire to appropriate, to become master, to become more, to become stronger” (Sahakian, 1981, p.80). And in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche said, “The great and the small struggle always revolves around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power – in accordance with the will to power which is the will of life” (1882/2001, p. 292). For Nietzsche, then, all conceptions of good, bad, and happiness are related to the will to power:

What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of

power in man, the will o power, power itself. What is bad?  
Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness?  
The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is  
overcome. (Kaufmann, 1982, p. 570) (Hergenhahn and  
Henley, 2014: 211 – 2)

## (5) Superman

- 1) For Nietzsche Superman became an ideal after the death of god. One has to master ones self and destiny and reach ones full potential, beyond good and evil, rising above established morality and living independent, creative lives.
- 2) Prof. Li: In this sense, Superman is not immoral, but to overcome ones weakness, to come to terms with ones desires and impulses, to be “self-overcoming”.
- 3) Prof. Li: As quoted, Supermen valued earth, not god

The Superman shall be the meaning of the earth! I entreat you, my brothers, remain true of the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners, whether they know it or not. They are despisers of life, (Nietzsche, 1883, 1969: 41 – 2)

## 4) The precarious human condition

Humans are in a precarious position. We are no longer animals, we are not yet supermen, and God, being dead, cannot help us: “Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still” (Nietzsche,

## 5) Supermen, be healthy, strong, take risks

The notion of supermen was Nietzsche's answer to the human, moral and philosophical dilemma. The meaning and morality of one's life come from within oneself. Healthy, strong individuals seek self-expansion by experimenting, by living dangerously. Life consists of an almost infinite number of possibilities, and the healthy person (the superman) explores as many of them as possible. Religions or philosophies that teach pity, humility, blind obedience, self-restraint, guilt, or a sense of community are simply incorrect. (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 213)

## 6) Develop Individuality by self-overcoming

For Nietzsche, the good life is ever-changing, challenging, devoid of regret, intense, creative, and risky. It is self-overcoming. Acting in accordance with the will to power means living a life of becoming more than you were, a life of continual self-renewal. Science, philosophy, and especially religion can only stifle the good life – the life of the superman. Any viewpoint that promotes herd conformity as opposed to individuality should be actively avoided. Nietzsche believed that repressive civilization is the primary cause of humans' mental anguish, a belief later shared by Freud.

The meaning of life, then, is found within the individual, and the daring, the supermen, will find it there: "Only dare to believe in yourselves – in yourselves and in your entrails! He who does not believe in himself always lies: (Nietzsche, 1883 – 1885 / 1969, p.146).

To be a superman, one must necessarily be intensely be intensely individualistic. (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 213)

## **(H) My Comments**

- 1) A great suffering intellectual whose impact is insurmountable. He lives his life with enormous courage. Suffering makes him stronger. It doesn't kill him, it makes him great. To quote Nietzsche: "whatever does not kill me makes me stronger."

I have often asked myself whether I am not more heavily obligated to the hardest years of my life than to any others.... And as for my long sickness, do I not owe it indescribably more than I owe to my health? I owe it a higher health – one which is made stronger by whatever does not kill it. I also owe my philosophy to it. Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit.... Only great pain, that long, slow pain in which we are burned with green wood, as it were – pain which takes its time – only this forces us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and to put away all trust, all good-naturedness, all that would veil, all mildness, all that is medium – things in which formerly we may have found our humanity. I doubt that such a pain make us "better," but I know that it makes us more profound. (Kaufmann, 1982, pp. 680-681) (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014: 213)

- 2) To put Nietzsche in intellectual history, he sees the dark side of human world and human nature, in an age of enlightenment (18 Century) and rationality (19 Century). He sees irrationality, repression and religious dogma, and forecasting the repression of ideology. In a sense he treasured tentative knowledge to guide us. He is not irrational after all.

- 3) His will to power is a development over Schopenhauer's will to survive in the zeitgeist of evolutionary principles (survival of the fittest), (see Santayana). (Search quotes from Wiki) He is a cultural critic (cynic) rather than a system builder.
- 4) Nietzsche's regulatory concept is knowledge and truth. He sees irrationality in history: he wants to reflect and be critical to the reading of historical texts, thus gaining knowledge and approaching truth. In this case he respects rational discussion. He did not retreat to intuitionism nor transcendental knowledge / introspection.
- 5) It seemed that Nietzsche was exceptionally gifted, who built up a strong / solid knowledge of philology in the German Gymnasium. His first work was on Greek tragedy. Naturally he had strong feeling and inclination to human suffering. The more he knew the old texts, the more he became critical of traditional morality, thus his writing *Genealogy of Morality*. He had given up his faith by age 20.
- 6) He has thorough knowledge of Western philosophy and classics from Plato to Kant and Schopenhauer. His physical suffering (ill-health) and mental stress (religion and morality) pushed him to "will to power" and "supermen", testifying his notion that all philosophies are autobiographies and so is he.
- 7) Santayana claimed that Nietzsche's whole philosophy was a reaction to Schopenhauer. Michel Foucault called Nietzsche's work as "a revelation". It affected him deeply. (Wiki search)